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Building Community Support for Impaired-Driving Enforcement

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has made considerable progress preventing impaired-driving crashes, injuries, and fatalities by discouraging alcohol-impaired driving. One of the most effective countermeasures is high-visibility enforcement (HVE), a traffic safety approach designed to deter unlawful behaviors and promote voluntary behavior change in accordance with traffic laws through increased enforcement and communications efforts. Over the past two decades traffic safety programs have used the HVE model to change alcohol-impaired driving behavior. However, there is still room for improvement. In 2020, there were 11,653 alcohol-impaired driving fatalities, accounting for 30 percent of all traffic fatalities.

NHTSA funded a demonstration project consisting of community engagement and HVE enforcement to decrease alcohol-impaired driving in Joplin, Missouri. It focused on building community support for impaired-driving enforcement with the rationale that greater support would help sustain the positive behavioral changes from HVE campaigns. The objectives of the project were to:

1. Foster a community-wide collaboration of organizations active in public safety, public health, education, and other key sectors to enhance local acceptance of enforcement of impaired-driving laws.
2. Modify community norms to reject impaired driving deaths as acceptable or inevitable and to support enforcement of impaired-driving laws.
3. Decrease the number of vehicle operators driving while impaired.
4. Increase acceptance of enforcement efforts.

An evaluation of the demonstration project included a process component to assess implementation and an outcome component to assess changes in community attitudes about enforcement.

Site Selection

The requirement for the demonstration project site was a community with a population from 50,000 to 200,000 people and operational boundaries that allowed for significant behavioral and operational influence by a primary local law enforcement

agency. The program team selected Joplin, Missouri, from a shorter list of four communities after discussions with the Missouri State Highway Safety Office and the Joplin Police Department (JPD).

The evaluation team selected a control site that was in the same State and of similar size to Joplin but in a different media market. The control site selected was Cape Girardeau.

Implementation

In Joplin, JPD and its community partners collaborated on a program that used IMPACT (Injury Methods Practical Against Crime Trends). The program, called “We Are Out There Too. Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over,” ran from May 3, 2018, to August 2, 2019. JPD held two pre-intervention meetings and developed a strategic plan with a group of community representatives representing prosecutors, judges, physicians, medical facilities, high school faculty, members of the media, local state university faculty, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Law Enforcement Liaisons, large-fleet employers and the local bar owner association. However, while community partners initially expressed interest, attendance dropped following the kickoff press event. While JPD remained active throughout the program period, the only community participants who remained active were media partners and two hospitals that displayed the program message on their closed-circuit screens.

Media efforts in Joplin appeared strong with 584 earned media posts and articles about the JPD program that included impaired-driving safety reminder messages, especially during holiday and special event periods. JPD also actively used social media throughout the program, resulting in over 20,000 “reactions” on Facebook and Twitter. Overall traffic crashes and the percentages of impaired-driving crashes have been increasing in Joplin since 2015. JPD experienced staffing shortages during the program period, which may have contributed to a 23-percent decrease in the monthly average number of impaired-driving arrests during the program compared to the previous 3 years overall. However, HVE efforts increased from the previous year, resulting in 5,798 traffic citations and 1,005 arrests leading to 227 impaired-driving arrests and 386 impaired-driving citations.

Results

Successes documented during the Joplin demonstration project include the establishment of the Joplin Community Partners group comprising a wide sector of Joplin stakeholders and resulting in development of a comprehensive 15-month strategic impaired-driving HVE and communications plan and a well-attended kickoff media event resulting in earned media. Joplin Community Partners and JPD carried out the sustained impaired-driving HVE effort from May 2018 to August 2019 including enforcement, earned and social media outreach, variable message board signs to raise awareness, and a PSA that aired in Joplin hospital system waiting rooms and patient rooms.

When compared to the previous year (May 3, 2017, to May 2, 2018), the enforcement increased during the project period. Table 1 reflects a comparison between impaired-driving arrests and citations to reported impaired-driving crashes. During the 15-month enforcement period, overall traffic crashes increased while impaired-driving crashes remained stable.

Table 1 also shows the percentages of impaired-driving traffic crashes to overall traffic crashes. The last five rows of Table 1 segregate the total enforcement period (May 3, 2018, to August 2, 2019) by 3-month intervals.

Table 1. Arrests & Citations in Joplin, Missouri: May 3, 2015, to August 2, 2019

Period (Dates)	Arrests & Citations	Impaired Crashes	Percent Impaired
Pre-Enforcement Period (May 3, 2015–May 2, 2016)	573	28	2.9%
Pre-Enforcement Period (May 3, 2016–May 2, 2017)	652	41	3.6%
Pre-Enforcement Period (May 3, 2017–May 2, 2018)	533	56	3.1%
Enforcement Period (May 3, 2018–August 2, 2019)	663	74	3.9%
May 3, 2018–August 2, 2018	148	9	2.3%
August 3, 2018–November 2, 2018	127	11	2.7%
November 2, 2018–February 2, 2019	62	13	7.0%
February 3, 2019–May 2, 2019	144	10	2.4%
May 3, 2019–August 2, 2019	182	31	6.1%

Despite the initial interest and extensive strategic planning in coordination with the Joplin Community Partners group, project staff changes, low staffing resources, scheduling conflicts, and lesser community partner engagement prevented the implementation of many of the communications, enforcement, and public outreach identified in the strategic plan.

Conclusions

Although there were successes noted during the Joplin demonstration project (e.g., community member involvement at project onset led to the development of a 15-month comprehensive strategic plan, and increased year-round enforcement), community-oriented enforcement as implemented in this demonstration project was not effective at building community support for impaired-driving enforcement or increasing the perceived risk of enforcement needed for HVE to be effective.

In addition, the program required a focus on impaired driving when across all intercept surveys, most respondents in Joplin said they felt distracted driving was their community's biggest traffic safety problem. The failure to increase the perceived risk of being punished for illegal impaired-driving behavior may also have resulted from limited perception of enforcement activity. Enforcement was focused in limited areas of the community based on problem identification—rather than widespread enough to suggest everyone in the community was at increased risk of encountering enforcement. JPD resource limitations resulted in fewer officers conducting traffic enforcement during the program period.

Download a copy of *Evaluation of Community-Oriented Enforcement Demonstration Projects* (DOT HS 813 338) at https://rosap.nhtl.bts.gov/view/dot/62747/dot_62747_DS1.pdf.

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